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A STUDY OF DROPOUTS FROM ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS.

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THE FACTORS WHICH MIGHT HAVE CAUSED ADULTS TO DROP OUT OF AN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAM WERE EXAMINED. THIS ADULT PROGRAM WAS CONDUCTED IN A SMALL CITY IN WISCONSIN FROM JANUARY TO JUNE, 1966. TWO TEACHERS, A READING TEACHER AND AN ENGLISH TEACHER, HELD CLASS TWICE A WEEK FOR 50 SESSIONS. THIRTY-EIGHT ADULTS RANGING IN AGE FROM 18 TO 60 WERE DIVIDED INTO TWO GROUPS ACCORDING TO READING LEVELS. SIXTEEN ADULTS COMPLETED THE 50 SESSIONS OR 100 HOURS. DATA WERE GATHERED BY MEANS OF A QUESTIONNAIRE, AND PERSONAL INTERVIEWS WITH 10 OF THE 22 DROPOUTS. THE CHANGE TO DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME, PAYMENT FOR CHILD CARE AND TRANSPORTATION, AND CHANGE IN JOB WERE FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' NONCOMPLETION OF THE PROGRAM. RESULTS CONFIRMED THE FINDINGS OF THE NATIONAL OPINION RESEARCH CENTER THAT ADULTS OF THE LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC CLASS DROP OUT OF ADULT EDUCATION CLASSES MAINLY FOR EXTERNAL OR SITUATIONAL REASONS. IMPLICATIONS ARE DISCUSSED, AND RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFERENCES INCLUDED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL READING CONFERENCE ANNUAL MEETING (16TH, ST. PETERSBURG, DECEMBER 1-3, 1966). (BK)

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A Study of Dropouts from Adult Literacy Programs[1,2]

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Introduction

The Problem

Title IIb of the Economic Opportunity Act offers to adults 18 years of age and older, the chance to attain an eighth grade education. Of the adults who are eligible for the Adult Basic Education classes, some never attended school, others dropped out of school as children, and others failed to acquire even a minimal basic education despite prolonged school attendance. One of the

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[2]A paper read at the National Reading Conference annual meeting, St. Petersburg, Florida, December 1-3, 1966.

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most difficult tasks, according to Adult Basic Education teachers, is to entice marginally literate or otherwise inadequately educated adults to class and to keep them in the program.

In a recent national survey, it was discovered that the lower socio-economic class, which comprises most of the potential students for Adult Basic Education programs (1:V-4), was as aware as other classes of the value of education from a financial standpoint. Nevertheless, this class, which perhaps has the most to gain, was the least represented on the rolls of adult education classes (3:241). A basic question, then, is why adults who apparently need it most do not choose to take advantage of instruction offered at no expense to them under Title IIb.

A related question, equal in importance, is why adults who have made the important decision to return to school dropout. Although much work has been done with dropouts from high school, few educators have been concerned with those who leave Adult Basic Education classes. Skeats (7:3), however, considers adult dropouts just as important as those from the public schools "because these mature minds are the stewards of future history or NON-history." Furthermore, the attitudes toward education of adults profoundly influence the educational aspirations of their children, making continuing education desirable in reducing the ranks of dropouts from high school (8:9).

Once having overcome initial psychological barriers to enrolling in Adult Basic Education classes, why do some students dropout? What obstacles are preventing them from attending class? If

some barriers to attendance can be determined, perhaps in the future provisions can be made to overcome them, making Adult Basic Education more attractive to those who need it. Thus, the specific purpose of this study was to examine factors that caused adults to dropout of one particular basic education program. The focus was more upon external or situational factors than upon psychological ones, which are both more difficult to assess and less amenable to outside control. This study, then, might be considered a prototype for future research that should be done in evaluating Adult Basic Education programs.

Related Literature

The National Opinion Research Center (3) polled adults to discover their reactions to continuing education. The most significant factor determining participation in adult education was the extent of previous formal education. In surveying classes of differing subject matter a preponderance of those who had attended college was found in all types of courses (3:30). Apparently, those who need education the most participate the least in adult education.

Age was found to be the next most important factor in participation, although education was nearly twice as influential (3:105). In a test of disposition toward learning, the item "Feel too old to learn" was named 34% more often by older people (over 45 years of age) than by younger people in the lower socio-economic class. In the middle and upper classes it was named

significantly less frequently even by older people (3:218). It appears, then, that the lower class is most affected by the stereotype that aging impairs the ability to learn, although studies (4:4) have demonstrated that this is fallacious.

Also relevant is the fact that people of the lower socio-economic class favored vocational education. They chose courses conveying practical skills 22% more often, on the average, than the other classes which valued education for general knowledge as well as for utility (3:237). Other writers (2,5) also list vocational aspirations--both job-seeking and job advancement--as key motivating factors in enrolling in Adult Basic Education. Other reasons for enrolling fall in the category of self-improvement, e.g. maintaining the parent image, aiding in religious study, and providing a social outlet. Finally, sometimes enrollment is in response to the request or requirement of a social welfare agency.

Neff (5:21) preceives economic poverty as directly related to non-participation in Adult Basic Education programs operating through the following factors: Child care problems, minimum subsistence needs, lack of proper clothing, and need for medical attention. External or situational factors such as these were named most frequently by the lower socio-economic class as reasons for non-participation in continuing education; they listed psychological factors or unfavorable attitudes toward education less often (3:220). It seems likely that such external factors may also cause adults to withdraw from educational programs.

The Study

The Setting

A small city in central Wisconsin was the setting for the study. According to the United States Census of Population in 1960 (6:72), for the first eight grades the education levels of the city's population of more than 18,000 adults of 25 years of age an and older were as follows:

None		Grades 1-4		Grades 5-6		Grade 7		Grade 8	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
56	48	578	467	589	630	654	543	2054	2342

The need for Adult Basic Education within the community is apparent since a sizeable number of people have not even attended school for eight years. The levels of educational attainment within the Adult Basic Education class itself are listed in descending order of frequency: Grades 10-12, no education, 4-6, and 1-3. The reading levels, as tested by the Gates Reading Survey, are also listed in order of frequency: Reading level 0-3, 4-6, and 7-8, the first category including more than twice as many students as the second.

The Adult Basic Education program was begun in January, 1966. Meetings were held on Monday and Wednesday from 7 to 9 pm. The program included 50 sessions, or 100 hours, running until the last week in June. The two teachers, a reading teacher and an

English teacher, were both associated with the vocational school where the class was held. One teacher also acted as the promoter and co-ordinator, recruiting students and planning the program.

Of the class, 38 studesnt ranging in age from 18 to 60, was divided into two groups according to reading levels. The 38 students who enrolled at the beginning of the class, 16 finished at the end of June. The 22 students who did not come to the last class were considered to be dropouts, even though some them enrolled in the program for the following fall semester.

Procedure

The head teacher provided data about each dropout in response to a questionnaire. The following information was requested:

Date enrolled
Date terminated
Age
Citizenship status
Sex
Last grade completed in school
Reading level
I. Q.
Vocation
Attendance
Reasons given for enrolling in the Adult Basic Education class
Reasons given for dropping out
Estimate of progress in classwork (test scores, if available).
Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with progress.
Reasons for progress or lack of progress.
Future educational and vocational ambitions.
Marital status
Number of children and their years in school.
Given money for transportation? Amount?
Given money for child-care services? Amount?

The investigator obtained a list of names and addresses of dropouts who were expected to be co-operative in discussing the program. To guard against frightening new or prospective students, only ten of the 22 dropouts were interviewed.

Results

Because the number of subjects was limited, the results are presented informally in an attempt to illustrate the reasons typically given for dropping out of the Adult Basic Education class. In each case the reasons for enrolling in the class are also stated so that the intentions of the student may be more clearly understood.

Case #4, who was personally interviewed, revealed that he had to dropout of the program when the daylight hours were extended in the evening due to daylight-saving time. Being a gravel truck driver, he was given the opportunity to work overtime in the evenings in the busy spring season. His reason for enrolling in the class was to gain enough competence in basic skills to advance to bookkeeper at the same company. His attendance was steady before daylight-saving time, and he was rated as a hard worker by the teacher.

Case #14, likewise stated that the daylight hours in the evening were needed for work. Being a farmer, he had enrolled so that he might be able to participate more in co-operative agriculture meetings. He felt that basic education would help him to

manage his records and make him a better farmer. He, like Case #4, plans to return to class during the winter months.

In approximately four other cases, both city workers and farm farmers, the change to daylight-saving time was named as a factor in dropping out of class.

Another reason cited for dropping out of the Adult Basic Education class was lack of transportation. Although provision for transportation funds is made under Title IIb, Case #6 stated that she received the payments only at the end of each month. Because her only source of income was from Aid to Dependent Children, she could not pay for a taxicab unless she received the money at each class. In the interview she, the mother ot three children, gave as her primary reason for enrolling in the class the necessity of obtaining a job after her children are grown up when she will no longer receive welfare payments. Besides wanting to get out of the house occasionally, she also wanted an education so that she would be able to keep up with her children when they enter school.

Since funds for child-care are not provided under Title IIb, Case #6 also could not afford to pay babysitting fees. Case #4, although a man, also stated that he could not afford to pay a babysitter so that both he and his wife could attend classes. Likewise, Case #29, although not a diligent student, could not attend regularly because she could not afford to pay for child-care with her small income from Aid to Dependent Children.

Case #5 also gave lack of transportation as a factor in dropping out. Although she did not live far from the school, her route was lonely and deserted at night. Another reason she

offered for dropping out was that she was more advanced in basic skills than the rest of the class, which she felt was too large for much individual attention. She, like Case #6, had enrolled to qualify for a job when she will no longer be eligible for welfare payments. She also had wanted to prove to her children that she could learn--a goal she felt she had accomplished.

Case #3 also felt he was too advanced for the class. Although he liked the teachers and enjoyed the class, he criticized the program for not giving enough attention to the more advanced students. He had joined the class on the recommendation of the Vocational Rehabilitation Board. He did not make much progress, appearing lazy both to the teacher and to the investigator.

In another instance, Case #10, who had joined the class while laid off from work, was put on the night shift at the factory, and his work conflicted with the Adult Basic Education class. He was forced not only to work a full-time night shift, but also a part-time job during the day. Although he had responded well to instruction, he had no way of continuing his education. His desire to advance to a better job was blocked by the necessity of supporting his wife and eight children.

A change in job was a factor in at least two other cases. Other circumstances, such as moving and hospitalization, caused several other students to dropout of the program.

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ABSTRACT

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Conclusions

The results of this study confirmed the findings of the National Opinion Research Center that adults of the lower socio-economic class drop out of adult education classes mainly for external or situational reasons.

One salient factor was the switch to daylight-saving time, which allowed the extension of the working day. Since the adults could not afford to forgo the opportunity to earn overtime pay in the city or to put in extra hours in farming, they had to leave the Adult Basic Education class. Class schedules could be arranged to make allowances for such seasonal shifts in employment and working hours. In the present setting, adult eveing classes that run from late fall to early spring would seem advisable.

Another provision that might be incorporated into future programs is that payments for transportation and child-care be made a at every class session. If the student were given the money at the beginning of the month, it might be spent for other items. Receiving the payments at the end of the month does not help the student when he needs it. Perhaps a petty cash fund of the exact amount needed by the class for transportation and child-care could be established with the provision that the teacher could draw out the necessary amounts on the day of each class.

An alternative to payment for child-care would be to establish a center for daytime and evening care, allowing both husband

and wife to take advantage of educational opportunities. For mothers living on welfare payments, such a center would also allow them to leave the house occasionally.

The other major reason for dropping out of class was a change in shift or a change in job. This factor seems unavoidable unless industries give their employees paid time off for educational advancement. Skeats (7:4) has proposed that industries allow 20% of the 40-four week for voluntary education. Not only would the workers become better members of their community, but they might also prove to be a profit to the industry if, having gained competence in basic skills, they can advance to better positions.

The obstacles to attendance, named above, have stemmed from economic poverty. Some further implications for Adult Basic Education programs can also be seen.

Many of the students interviewed said that the class size was too large to allow for much individual attention. Even though the class was divided into two groups, the range of abilities within the groups was quite great. It was found in another study (9) that students with the least formal schooling need the greatest proportion of individual help. Although the ratio of nineteen students to one teacher would not be considered large in the public schools, the dult asic ducation teacher can work more effectively with fewer students. The teachers had tried to reduce the ratio by asking members of their own families to assist in teaching, but clearly another qualified instructor was needed.

Other implications were perceived by the investigator, although they did not stem directly from talking to the dropouts.

Grouping should be flexible, each student being classified both by reading level and by arithmetic ability. Students should work only at their own level and in the areas of their personal need. The class work, furthermore, should be as immediately applicable as possible. Although a vocational orientation is not necessary, the student should be able to see how he can use his new skills to make a better life for himself. Help should be given in such practical matters as filling out income tax forms.

Finally, a person with a genuine interest in Adult Basic Education should be hired full-time to begin the program. To recruit students, the community agencies and industries should be contacted to build a list of possible students. The project head should be paid for work done outside of the classroom, such as following up the dropouts from the class. He should be permitted sufficient flexibility to make adjustments in scheduling and curriculum that seem advantageous to the class.

The teachers, furthermore, should be open and cordial. All of the students interviewed said that they enjoyed the friendly atmosphere of the classroom and that they particularly liked the teachers. Likewise, it seemsof great importance to the student's progress that the relationships with the other class members be good so that a group spirit, dedicated to the progress of all class members, may be fostered.

The opinions of the dropout are important in planning future Adult Basic Education programs. Although psychological barriers to attending class can not be so easily overcome, the external or situational ones can be alleviated. Small matters like scheduling and supporting services can be combined into a set of conditions that make the difference between success and failure for an instructional program and for the student it is committed to serve.

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